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OPINION

Bad precedents at USIA

By Pat M. Holt

CONGRESS and the Reagan administration are collaborating to hasten the misdirection of the United States Information Agency from explaining the United States abroad to propagandizing the American people at home.

That is exactly what Congress did not want to happen — and thought it had taken care to prevent — when it created USIA in 1948. At that time, it specifically forbade the dissemination in the US of any USIA materials (except for the scholarly journal "Problems of Communism," which is for sale by the Government Printing Office). That prohibition remains in law, but is now riddled with so many exceptions as to have lost much of its bite.

The rationale for the prohibition was a well-justified fear of giving any US president such a potentially powerful propaganda weapon. Part of that fear came from differences, which are still unresolved, over the purposes of USIA. Should it simply present a full and fair image of the US, warts and all, or should it emphasize the good and play down or ignore the bad? Should it content itself with promoting US foreign policy or should it also undercut the Soviet Union?

However these questions are answered there are sound reasons for limiting USIA's output to foreign audiences. American presidents have ample means of influencing public opinion as it is. Public policy is better served when opinion is formed from a welter of conflicting voices.

The erosion of the no-domestic-distribution stricture on USIA began innocently enough in the traumatic aftermath of the assassination of President Kennedy. USIA made a film for foreign audiences about the Kennedy presidency and its end. Entitled "Years of Thunder, Day of Drums," it was technically professional and artistically moving — a thoroughly good job.

A number of members of Congress and congressional staff saw it at one or another US embassy overseas. Somebody said it was a pity that US audiences could not see it. Somebody else said, why not make an exception in this case? Objections that an unfortunate precedent would be established were brushed aside, and nobody wanted to argue loudly against the film anyway.

So the camel's nose came under the tent. The camel is now all the way inside and threatening to tear the tent down. Since the Kennedy exception, at least 40 other films have been specifically exempt by title plus others which are parts of two series.

Most of these, by themselves, are unobjectionable. Some are good; some are relatively harmless puffery; some (remember the TV extravaganza "Let Poland be

Poland"?) are embarrassingly bad; some raise questions of public policy. Congress allowed Little League Baseball Inc. to buy the exclusive rights for US distribution of "Summer Fever," a USIA film about — you guessed it — Little Leagues. This was presumably used to promote and raise money for Little League baseball — an activity, laudable though it may be, which is perhaps not a legitimate function of the federal government.

Now a quantum jump has been taken in the process of turning USIA back on the American people. Congress has given the agency \$500,000 to train Afghan rebels in public relations techniques. One of the things which the congressional sponsors suggest might be done is to give the rebels mini-cameras that they could use to take footage which would then be sold to US and possibly foreign television networks. (Three of the USIA-made films authorized for American showing already have to do with Afghanistan.)

USIA, under the President's good friend Charles Wick, is naturally happy to have the money, though the agency is not yet committed on how to spend it. The past record does not augur restraint.

If the Afghan project proceeds, it will mean that the US government is paying a foreign political-paramilitary movement to propagandize itself with the American people. One reason there has been little objection so far is that the Afghan rebels enjoy widespread support among the American public. Arguing against giving them any kind of help carries political risks, and nobody feels very strongly about it anyway. This was the case with the Kennedy film and it is frequently the case when a bad precedent is established while everybody is denying that any precedent is involved.

It is to be hoped that TV networks would think several times about buying film made with as much self-interest as that which would come from the Afghan rebels. But assuming the Afghan project goes ahead (because, after all, nobody objects to helping in this case), what is to prevent USIA, or even the CIA, from giving similar help to the Nicaraguan "contras"? One can see it now: "Freedom Fighter" with Sylvester Stallone in the title role. Or what is to prevent similar help to the government of El Salvador? Or one or another faction in South Africa? Or President Marcos of the Philippines? (This is not as far-fetched as it may sound. One of the films which Congress approved for domestic showing was about Iran and was entitled "Firm Alliance.") Or any other foreign movement which Congress and/or the administration wish to support, regardless of how controversial it may be?

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